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The Authority of the Catholic Church Over Abortion

by

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Some Catholics have questioned the authority of the bishops and the Pope to speak authoritatively on the question of abortion.

It should first be noted that the basic difference between Catholicism and Protestantism is the nature of authority in the church. The Catholic Church holds and teaches that the bishops united with the bishop of Rome as successors of the apostles have divine authority by the will of Christ to interpret correct doctrine concerning faith and morals. That is, to authoritatively teach what Christ wants to reveal to us in Scripture and in the traditions of the church. By "morals" we mean how to correctly conduct one's life to be pleasing to God. This is known as the ordinary magisterium or teaching authority of the Catholic Church. There is also the extraordinary magisterium which belongs to the bishop of Rome alone as defined by Vatican I which has been only used twice in history. The definition of the morality of abortion lies in the area of the ordinary magisterium which is infallible of its very nature. That is, when all the bishops of the church united with the Pope speak on a matter of faith or morals, they cannot be mistaken by the will of Christ.

All admit that the morality of abortion is a moral teaching, that is, a way of conducting life correctly over which the Catholic Church in her official teaching capacity has proper jurisdiction, that is, the right by divine authority to say what human actions are moral and what are not moral. This is the core teaching that the Catholic Church relates both to correctly interpret divine relation by the power of the Holy Spirit given to the apostles of Christ and to their successors; and to correctly interpret the natural law of creation or "morals" by which man can correctly lead a life pleasing to God. The natural law which flows from human nature is applicable to all men and women because they all share the same human nature. Therefore when the Catholic Church speaks on matters of morals

about human nature, it teaches what is common to all men and women and not just to Catholics. *Her divine authority* is over the consciences of Catholics only; but *the truth* of what she teaches in matters of morals appeals to the consciences of non Catholics as well. When she speaks about the morality of abortion, she speaks the truth of its heinousness for all men and women, not just for Catholics since they share the same human nature.

This divine authority to teach about abortion in the Catholic Church by the ordinary magisterium flows from scripture and tradition starting from the *Didache* to Vatican II. *Rev 21:8* speaks of the evil *pharmakoi*, that is, of those who mix potions and elixirs to bring about abortion. In addition the Church's tradition starting from the year 70 in the *Didache* or "teaching of the twelve disciples" taught the immorality of attacking innocent human life in the womb, so common among the Romans (along with the immorality of the abandonment or "exposure" of unwanted babies to be eaten by wild beasts which was really infanticide). From the beginning of her tradition and from scripture the Catholic Church has taught this: to directly attack unborn life is a grave crime, a sin and a great evil. It was forbidden under all circumstances as an intrinsically evil. All the discussion of "ensoulment" or when human personhood begins was only a theological discussion and in no way interfered with or contradicted this central and constant teaching of the Catholic Church. The last to speak to this was Vatican II (1962-1965) and Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (the gospel of life in 1986). Therein the Pope simply proclaimed that the holding of the Catholic Church in its ordinary magisterium was about the inherent immorality of abortion and euthanasia and as such are infallible and defined moral teachings of the Catholic Church. That is, these doctrines must be held as revealed by all Catholics (*de fide Catholica*). That settles the issue once and for all for Catholics. Non Catholics are held to the truth of this moral teaching and such must be convinced by rational argument since the Catholic Church has no authority over the consciences of non Catholics, only moral persuasion even if it teaches the truth in this area.

It would be anomaly to say that the authority of the Catholic Church is restricted to divine revelation alone and not to morals, that is, to the correct way by which Catholics must morally lead their lives to be pleasing to God. Otherwise it would mean simply that only what is in divine revelation need be followed and Catholics would have no divine moral guidance on important issues of living morally correct human existence pleasing to God. Admittedly the further we get from general principles ("thou shall not kill," "thou shall not steal," "thou shall not bear false witness"), the weaker the conclusions. But in matters in life and death

such as abortion and euthanasia, the matter is so grave, so determinative of human existence, so serious in their consequences that the Church has chosen to speak in these matters in a definitive way, i.e. infallibly. The ordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church has spoken loudly and clearly in a counter cultural way so that the whole world will know, both Catholic and non-Catholic, where the Catholic Church stands on these two important life issues. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind on these matters. The Catholics who disagree with this teaching are no longer Catholics in the full sense of the word. They are ex-communicated from the body of the church to that extent and should not receive Holy Communion which is the sign of total communion in and with the Catholic Church. This applies to Catholic politicians as well as to ordinary Catholics. Non-Catholics are held to the truth of this teaching concerning human nature but the authority of the Catholic Church here is to persuade them of this truth by rational argument.
